

KHRUSHCHEV IN COMMAND

The Party Reasserts Its Supremacy

RICHARD LOWENTHAL

WHEN Nikita Khrushchev, First Secretary of the Communist party of the Soviet Union, had himself elected Minister President by the Supreme Soviet on March 27, 1958, he served notice on Russia and the world that the five years' crisis of succession which followed Stalin's death was over and done with. The pretense of collective leadership, once an expression of a real need for compromise among rival leaders and later a useful fiction, had now become a useless impediment and a source of weakness: it was time for everybody to realize that the Soviet Union had a single ruler again—a dictator whose decisions could not be challenged by his critics because his power was not limited by institutions.

In fact, of course, the succession crisis had ended five months earlier, when the Central Committee confirmed Marshal Zhukov's removal from control of the armed forces and his expulsion from its own ranks. The elimination of the last potential rival of the First Secretary—the last man, that is, who controlled the levers of a potentially independent power machine—completed at the same time the reassertion of monolithic control by the party machine itself. The final victory of the single leader coincided with the renewed triumph of the single party—the end of the crisis of succession spelt a new lease of life for the totalitarian regime.

In terms of the party machine itself, Khrushchev's victory had already been com-

plete by the time of the 20th Congress in February 1956. Having gained a flying start when Malenkov was removed from the party secretariat within a week of his assumption of the premiership in March 1953; having helped to emancipate the party from the secret police by the overthrow of Beria in June 1953; having been confirmed as First Secretary in September of the same year; and having used his powers of appointment to such effect that by the beginning of 1955 he was able to replace Malenkov at the head of the government by his own nominee—Khrushchev was in a position to pack both the party congress and the new Central Committee with a crushing majority of his protégés and supporters. If his principal rivals and potential opponents were nevertheless re-elected to the presidium of the new Central Committee, this was done in deference to their personal standing and to the social weight of the bureaucratic strata they represented; in strictly inner-party terms they remained on sufferance only.

Logically, the two crises of 1957—the elimination from the party presidium of Malenkov, Molotov, and Kaganovich at the end of June, and of Zhukov at the beginning of November—turned on the reassertion of the party machine's control over the corresponding sectors of the state machine—the economic bureaucracy and the army. The spokesmen of the former were defeated in an open political struggle on Khrushchev's policy for the reorganization of industrial planning; the leader of the latter was caught unawares when his bid for greater independence from party control, and his campaign against the surviving accomplices of Stalin's blood purge of the armed forces, was still in the early stage, and probably before he himself had realized that such a campaign could only

RICHARD LOWENTHAL, who here examines the role of Khrushchev in the complex struggle for power in the USSR, is a veteran analyst of Soviet and East European affairs; his writings have appeared in *COMMENTARY* and other magazines. Normally a staff writer for the *London Observer*, he is at present engaged on a major study of totalitarianism.

be successful if it aimed at replacing the primacy of the party by that of the army. By his preventive stroke, Khrushchev destroyed the one remaining potential check on his own power.

Khrushchev, then, is Stalin's uncontested heir. Like Stalin before him, he has eliminated all potential rivals within five years, and has done so without bloodshed—as Stalin did at that stage. Like Stalin, he has won by using the party machine as the decisive lever of power, and his victory consolidates once again the totalitarian regime after a period of divided authority and uncertainty of direction. Finally, just as Stalin took over the basic objectives of Lenin—objectives implicit in the nature of single-party rule consecrated by an ideology—so Khrushchev has taken over the basic objectives of Stalin.

But as Stalin was not another Lenin, so Khrushchev is not another Stalin. Apart even from all the differences in their personalities, Lenin's heir had to adapt his methods and policies to a different historical situation—to the isolation of the Soviet state in a non-revolutionary world, to the task of "building socialism in a single country," i.e. of maintaining the dictatorship of his party in the name of "socialism," while carrying out ruthlessly the industrialization of a poor and backward country. Even so, Stalin's heir has to adapt *his* methods and policies to the different historical situation in which he finds himself today. For while the struggle for the succession is over, the international, economic, and social problems that have come to light during the crisis remain. Khrushchev today has to rule a Soviet Union different from that of Stalin, to lead a different Soviet bloc, and to maneuver in a different world power constellation. The resulting policy changes are greater inside Russia than within the Soviet bloc, and greater within the bloc than in relation to the non-Communist world. But they are discernible in all three fields.

THE end of the succession crisis has meant the restoration of the party's supremacy over all branches of the state machine. It has insured that the party's unending effort

to use state power for molding society according to its preconceived notions of the road to Communism—what has been termed the "permanent revolution from above"—will continue. Yet the power of party and state to force their will on Soviet society is no longer as absolute as in Stalin's time: though free from institutional checks or legal impediments, it is now limited by hard economic and social facts. The massive use of force in the daily processes of economic life, so characteristic of Stalin's methods, could only yield the desired results under primitive conditions—under conditions, that is, of a high birth rate, a pressing over-population in agriculture, and a limited importance of industrial skills. Where there is no practical limit to exploitation; where skill, care, initiative are important for a limited number of jobs only, a rapid succession of starving generations will build the new towns and roads, the new railways, factories, and mines required, as effectively (and more cheaply) as would a well-fed, well-trained, and comparatively long-lived modern working class. But once natural population growth and influx from the countryside slow down, once it becomes more important to operate modern machinery than to build the outward scaffolding of industry, the emphasis inevitably turns to quality of performance and productivity per manshift—and hence from coercion to incentives in economic life.

All this is of no immediate relevance for the issue of totalitarian *political* power: as Mr. Bertram Wolfe has pointed out, the example of Hitler Germany has shown that despotism can flourish in a highly developed industrial country as well as in a primitive Oriental economy. But it is highly relevant for the impact of the totalitarian regime on the daily lives of the mass of the population, for not even the most powerful despot can run modern factories—or for that matter modern dairy farms—with the methods by which the pyramids were built. That is why state slavery, which played a vital part in the Stalinist economy, remained a marginal wartime phenomenon in the economy of the Third Reich, and why it is being reduced to

a marginal role in the Soviet Union today.

There have, of course, always been incentives in the Soviet economy for the skilled minority—the Stakhanov workers and model collective farms, not to mention the technical and managerial intelligentsia—just as there is still economic coercion against “vagrants” and “idlers” today as part of the ultimate sanctions of social and political discipline. But the over-all shift from coercion to incentives is a basic and irreversible trend of the post-Stalinist economy—the common denominator underlying all those reforms of the past five years which may be expected to last because they were induced by fundamental social changes which the political crisis merely allowed to come to the surface. These reforms comprise the transformation of most of the slave labor camps into forced settlements for legally free workers who live with their families and receive normal wages; the abolition of the “labor book” for free workers; the granting of improved minimum wages and of pensions; and the drastic reduction of forced delivery quotas, plus an increase in state prices for the produce of the collective farmers. Together, these measures have transformed the lives of the bulk of the Soviet population, however poor the standard attained even now by large portions of them may be. What is more, they have limited the power of the dictatorship in a manner unforeseen by the manipulators of the “permanent revolution from above”; for the planned dynamism of the latter now encounters an unplanned dynamism which flows from the requirements of continued economic growth—requirements which in their competitive struggle against other industrial powers the rulers can ignore only at their peril.

KHRUSHCHEV and his propagandists would of course deny that any such contradictions between their doctrinal concepts and the requirements of continued economic growth exist. On the contrary, they would claim that the post-Stalin economic reforms are the living proof of the correctness of their doctrine, the fulfillment of their promise

that the sacrifices made for the sake of rapid industrialization would in due course bear fruit in improved living standards. But apart from their own doctrinaire resistance against such improvements (so vividly expressed in the overthrow of Malenkov in 1955 for his alleged excessive concern with higher output of consumer goods) there exists now a classic example of how the masters of an all-powerful state are being forced by the logic of economics to deviate from the road mapped out by their doctrine: the decision to sell to the collective farms the bulk of the machinery hitherto concentrated in the state-owned Machine Tractor Stations (MTS), and the implied further decision to abandon the system of payments in kind and to place future relations between the collective farms and the state entirely on a cash basis. This is a revolutionary decision, bound to exert an influence on the structure of Soviet society no less profound than the transformation of the slave camp system, and the recent reorganization of industrial planning. But it cannot by any stretch of the imagination be described as a revolution according to plan—as part of the transition to Communism foreseen in the theory. For Communist theory had hitherto always insisted that state property constitutes the “higher form” of socialization, in which collective property—the “lower form”—would in due course be absorbed, whereas the present reform consists in turning over the decisive means of agricultural production from state ownership to collective ownership; and Communist theory, as summed up, for instance, in Stalin’s 1952 pamphlet on “Economic Problems of Socialism,” called for a steady replacement of market exchanges between town and country by organized barter, whereas the present reform tends to replace the one major element of organized barter—the payments in kind made by the collective farms to the MTS in return for their services—by sales against cash to the state trading organizations.

The reasons for the adoption of this highly official, if somewhat shamefaced, form of “revisionism” may be summed up in two

words: efficiency and incentives. The whole series of reform measures introduced in Soviet agriculture since Stalin's death have been geared to the double objective of getting the peasants to produce and deliver more by granting them higher incomes, without permanently increasing the cost to the state per unit—to achieve higher production by better prices, and then lower costs by increased productivity. Yet while a considerable increase in output was in fact achieved, it proved impossible to make a rational calculation of production costs, let alone to lower them. The more intense the search of the Soviet leaders for methods which would lower agricultural cost without taking the peasants' new incentives away, the more obvious the need for concentrating all the means of production under one authority. At the 1956 party Congress, Mikoyan openly warned against the tendency to extend the sphere of barter and insisted on the expansion of domestic trade as an indispensable stimulus to rational accounting; while Khrushchev has repeatedly urged the *kolkhoz* managements to pay their members fixed monthly cash advances on their share. The decision to allow the collective farms to buy their own machinery is clearly a decisive step on the road to a rational cash economy in agriculture, and will in turn accelerate other steps: the government will now have to replace the former system of agricultural procurement by more strictly economic methods of state purchase, probably at a single price instead of the present gradation for different quotas; the factories producing agricultural machinery, instead of "distributing" unwanted machinery to the MTS, will have to enter into genuine market relationships with their new customers, the collective farms; and the latter, called upon under the decree to pay the two million tractorists and mechanics whom they will have to take over from the MTS their accustomed wages and pensions, will be under increased pressure to assure an equally stable cash minimum to their own members.

When Stalin was faced with similar proposals in the last year of his life, he termed

them a "retrograde step." And indeed the new policy strengthens collective farm property at the expense of centrally administered distribution, and dispenses with the principal lever of state and party pressure in the countryside. Are we then to conclude that Khrushchev has jettisoned doctrine for the sake of efficiency? Not at all. For not only are Khrushchev and his propagandists busy explaining that theirs is really a better way of reaching the final goal of turning all collective farm property into national property—they mean it, and they act upon it. A collective farm whose members receive a guaranteed minimum wage is already very close in structure to a state farm. Clearly, it will come closer to it the bigger the revenue that has to be reinvested. A confusing picture? Yet the essence is simple: continuity in doctrinaire aims—flexibility in the choice of means. Any analysis which takes account only of the continuity, or of the new realism, would be misleading. The actual evolution of Soviet society, even now that the succession crisis has ended, is no longer the simple imposition on that society of a preconceived scheme by the totalitarian state: it takes place in a series of forced compromises between the will of the ruling party and the spontaneous development of society, between the logic of total power and the logic of economic and social growth. The resulting picture is perhaps more likely to resemble the zigzags of the 20's—the NEP under Lenin and the early years of Stalin—than the steamroller movement of fully developed Stalinism.

FROM another angle, this means that the "permanent revolution from above" may enter a less violent phase. The most serious reason for believing this is not the weakening of the secret police—which was a by-product of the succession struggle and could in principle be reserved—nor Khrushchev's recent record and presumed personal intentions; but rather the certainty that large-scale violence would be harmful to economic growth at a stage when the pace of such growth is crucial for Russia's position as a

world power. Khrushchev's repudiation of the Stalinist doctrine on the constant sharpening of the class struggle has lately been expanded by official ideologists to the conclusion that during the transition to "Communism" all the remaining contradictions are "non-antagonistic," and can be solved by gradual, evolutionary methods. But while this outlook is clearly in harmony with Khrushchev's optimistic temperament, it is for this very reason unlikely to survive a major setback. The Soviet regime today has less *need* to use terrorism than in Stalin's time; but so long as the totalitarian state exists, it remains *capable* of reacting to serious difficulties by employing its *ultima ratio*.

No comparable change has occurred in the relations between the Soviet regime and the non-Communist world. The renewed consolidation of the party dictatorship insures that the fundamental character of these relations will remain the same as in Lenin's time—one of irreconcilable hostility, or to use the modern term, of cold war; for the existence of powerful foreign opponents remains the indispensable justification of the totalitarian regime—all the more so if it endeavors to solve its domestic problems without constant resort to mass terrorism against "internal enemies." Yet certain limitations upon the exercise of totalitarian state power have always been present in the field of foreign policy, owing to the existence of powerful non-Communist states. Of late the situation has become more fluid, thanks to the development of thermonuclear weapons and inter-continental missiles, and the consequent establishment of a "balance of terror." Whatever one's estimate of the marginal advantages still held by either side, the likelihood is that the "balance of terror" will last for the politically foreseeable time, and Soviet foreign policy under Khrushchev is clearly geared to this assumption.

The impact of this realization upon the Soviet leaders has been a considerable degree of "freedom from fear": for despite their propagandist speculation on mass hysteria elsewhere, they clearly do not be-

lieve that the "imperialists" will deliberately start a world war. Since the launching of the Sputniks, this new sense of security has been expressed in the abandonment of the old formula about "capitalist encirclement," on the grounds that it is no longer clear who is encircling whom. The over-all result has been to enable the Soviet leaders to take a more rational view of world affairs, without making them in the least inclined to grant concessions to their principal opponents. Perhaps the most important single change (in which Communist China was the pacemaker before it was fully adopted by Russia at the 20th Congress), has been the belated recognition that the new, ex-colonial nations of Asia and Africa are truly independent, and that diplomatic and economic wooing of these "uncommitted" countries offers better prospects of success than the traditional efforts to play the Western powers off against each other. At the same time, there has been a distinct increase of faith in the chances of Communist victories occurring abroad without direct Soviet support. Yet in one important respect Soviet diplomacy has recently returned to Stalin's methods: the use of local military threats, open or implied.

WHEN the campaign for "peaceful coexistence" was first launched after Stalin's death, it did not imply an abandonment of cold war politics, but it did suggest an effort to liquidate local wars and to renounce the kind of military pressure which served to keep the neighbors of the Soviet bloc under the threat of local war. The purpose was to "relax tension" and thus to reduce the armament burden, to weaken the cohesion of the NATO powers and their willingness to arm, and to win sympathy among the uncommitted nations. This policy led to the liquidation of the Korean and Indo-Chinese wars, the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Finland and Austria, and reached its climax with the Geneva summit meeting of 1955. Beginning with the international crisis in the fall of 1956—Hungary and Suez—and continuing more systematical-

ly since the launching of the first Sputnik, Soviet diplomacy has returned to the use of military pressure. The Hungarian massacre might be regarded as a special case, but the campaign of threats against Turkey over a "Syrian crisis" deliberately engineered by Russia, and the series of threats to the NATO powers, to prevent them from accepting the installation of missile sites on their territory, bear all the marks of a general policy deliberately chosen. One must conclude that the Soviets consider the balance of power to have changed so much in their favor that from now on the advantages of intimidation are likely to outweigh the disadvantages of appearing as a bully. The new combination of "Stalinist" threats, not with "Stalinist" caution, but with Khrushchevian overconfidence, may be of particular importance in favoring an adventurous policy in the Middle East.

The broad picture, then, is of Soviet confidence in a gradual advance to the worldwide victory of Communism by a combination of colonial conflicts, revolutions, and local wars or threats of war where these can be undertaken without serious risk. Yet there is a vulnerable area where popular forces pressing for social and political change have clearly been moving against Soviet interests: Eastern Europe. A list of the pre-occupations of Soviet diplomacy would have to begin with the persistent danger of political explosions in that region which might come to involve the security of the Soviet Union itself; and it would have to include the over-all burden of armaments, and more particularly the manpower burden and the risk of the spread of nuclear arms to more non-Communist states, including neighbors of the Soviet bloc. Any glance at the Soviet draft agenda for a new summit conference will confirm this picture; one may add that the proposal to replace the traditional four-power framework by one involving three governments on each side, expresses both the Soviet desire to demonstrate that they are now fully the equals in strength of their opponents, and their interest in symbolic recognition of the East European status quo.

Yet the Kremlin's basic attitude to a summit meeting is, for all the noisy propaganda, somewhat relaxed, for the Soviet leaders clearly feel that they are anyhow on the offensive in world affairs.

THERE remains the problem of over-all Communist direction. The struggle for the succession in the Soviet Union has been accompanied by a severe convulsion within the Soviet bloc. Here, too, Stalin's methods of insuring ideological and political unity under Soviet leadership had long proved irrational; and the very attempt to change them brought all the unsolved problems into the open and precipitated the crisis of 1956. Here, too, a consolidation of Soviet leadership seemed to have been achieved by Khrushchev when a joint declaration of principles by twelve "ruling" Communist parties was published last November. But in this field consolidation has proved more apparent than real, and the commitment to new, non-Stalinist methods remains precarious. Stalin had been aware that the rise of other sovereign Communist powers would constitute a danger to the unity of the Communist world. Soviet leadership of world Communism was to be a permanent article of faith, embodied in the discipline of a world party with its center in Moscow, and backed by the dominant role of Soviet state power. This concept was fully implemented in satellite Eastern Europe, where both the Communist conquest of power and the subsequent forcible transformation of the social structure were carried out under Soviet orders; but it was openly and successfully resisted by the Yugoslav Communists, and only nominally accepted by the Chinese, both of whom had conquered power primarily by their own efforts and in repeated defiance of Soviet advice. Moreover, the practical application of Stalinist control in satellite Europe led to a degree of Soviet exploitation which was bound to prove harmful to Soviet interests in the long run. After Stalin's death, the Soviet leaders set themselves the objective of removing the irrational features of Soviet control over the satellites, while maintaining

their subordination in principle. Exploitation was considerably reduced and in critical countries and moments even gave place to loans and temporary subsidies; large numbers of Soviet agents and "advisers" were withdrawn and control exercised chiefly (though never exclusively) at the top through the three parallel channels of party ties—all Soviet ambassadors to Communist governments were replaced by representatives of the party machine—of the joint high command of the Warsaw Pact, and of the Council for Mutual Economic Aid; the local party leaders were permitted, even encouraged, to broaden their support by material concessions, and to exercise their own judgment on such matters as the advisable pace of collectivization; and the excesses of competitive national investments in heavy industry were curbed in favor of a division of labor.

Yet there remained the problem of establishing a new relation with the sovereign Communist states, and particularly of liquidating Stalin's legacy of conflict with Yugoslavia. Malenkov seems to have favored the restoration of friendly relations with Yugoslavia without regard to ideology, i.e. he would have treated her as a non-Communist neutral with fairly "progressive" policies. But Khrushchev evidently believed that a return of Yugoslavia to the fold would give a great new impetus to the worldwide revival of the Communist faith on which he counted, and that this could be obtained by appealing to the Marxist-Leninist convictions of the Yugoslav Communists to make them rejoin the world Communist movement as equals. This "solution" was strictly verbal: the "sovereignty" of the states was to be a fiction, the ideological unity of the parties and their recognition of the primacy of the Soviet Union the reality—the satellite parties were to remain under strict discipline. For Poland, Gomulka accepted Soviet bloc solidarity, and that meant *de facto* subordination to Soviet foreign policy; but he did not accept the right of the Soviet leaders—or of any international organization dominated by them—to interfere with the internal running of his party,

or with any specific issues of its domestic policy, however important. He took his stand not on the right to stay neutral (like Nagy) or on any "revisionist" doctrine, like the Yugoslavs, but strictly on the principle of party autonomy as against subordination. The Russians who had used military force rather than allow the people of Hungary to overthrow Communist party rule, were clearly not prepared to go to the same length to break Gomulka's autonomy; but they were nevertheless faced with the question whether they could tolerate an example of insubordination that might easily spread.

FOR about a year after the critical October 1956, while the echoes of the battle of Budapest died away and the process of consolidation went on, Khrushchev put up with the autonomy of his Polish ally. But when he had won the last battle of the succession struggle—the removal of Zhukov—he confronted the Moscow conference of Communist parties last November with a renewed demand for ideological discipline under Soviet leadership. The declaration then adopted by the twelve "ruling" parties lays down once again a number of fairly detailed common principles for the "building of socialism," as well as the role of the Soviet Union as the single center of the world Communist movement, and the need for all parties to fight "revisionist" ideologies as the "main danger" in the present period. There is evidence that the Polish delegation accepted this text only under severe pressure, and after some amendments had been incorporated—amendments intended to safeguard the right of each party to decide on the application of common principles. It was obvious at the time that the real purpose of the declaration was to restore the subordination of all Communists, even in matters of domestic policy and party ideology, and to end the toleration of "polycentrism." Since then, the fight to break the autonomy of the Polish Communists has been continued, though mostly behind the scenes. It has become especially acute since the Prague meeting of Communist parties held in early March,

when publication of a new international journal was decided "in principle" (the Polish Communists posed as a condition of their cooperation that the journal should not interfere in the internal affairs of any Communist party). And it forms the background to the violence of the Soviet and Chinese onslaught on the new program of the Yugoslav Communists.

That the Yugoslavs refuse to join the Soviet bloc and give ideological reasons for this decision, may be a personal disappointment to Khrushchev, but can no longer come as a surprise, and is not in itself of enough importance to justify all this trouble. But that Belgrade explicitly formulates the principle of party autonomy on which the Poles have implicitly taken their stand (and which presumably some other satellite leaders would like to follow) explains the fury of the charge that their program is "calculated to undermine the unity of the world Communist movement." In fact, the Yugoslav issue is being used to warn the Poles that they must choose between Yugoslavia's "nationalist deviation" and Soviet orthodoxy—a choice that ten years ago led to Gomulka's fall from the party leadership and to his subsequent imprisonment. The efforts of the Polish Communists to take a "middle line," to condemn the Yugoslav views while defending their right to hold them, show how difficult their situation has become in the face of this pressure.

There remains the question why Khrush-

chev should try so hard to break the autonomy of his Soviet bloc allies as to endanger the degree of consolidation he had achieved. The answer must be that, being a totalitarian ruler, he is ultimately as convinced as Stalin was that no ally can be considered reliable unless he is under Moscow's discipline. He is probably genuine in his desire to treat the satellite peoples better and lead their Communist chiefs on a looser rein than Stalin did; he might even be willing to permit a disciplined Gomulka to continue much of his successful non-collectivist agricultural policy (for a time, though hardly all of it or forever). But he insists that it must depend on Moscow to decide what is orthodoxy and who is to be expelled from the Polish Communist party as a "revisionist." Without this disciplinary power, how could he, with his totalitarian mentality, be sure that Polish support of his foreign policies will be unconditional and wholehearted—how could he risk having the leader of an autonomous party as his partner at summit talks? Khrushchev's methods of pressure are more subtle than those used by Stalin against Tito, but he will not renounce his objective of restoring international discipline under Soviet leadership. A Communist one-party state need not always run its empire by the methods of ruthless exploitation and supervision devised by Stalin—but it still cannot turn the party empire into a commonwealth of truly independent allies.